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Tenure and participation in local REDD+ projects: Insights from southern Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

The new climate change mitigation scheme for developing countries known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) has been proposed as a way of reducing carbon emissions in the forest sector, whilst also protecting and improving the livelihoods and wellbeing of communities. This paper argues that it is important to resolve tenure ambiguity and ensure that communities participate in the REDD+ process by engaging them in project development and implementation. Drawing on data collected in six villages under two REDD+ projects targeted in Cameroon, this paper addresses four questions: (1) What are the tenure conditions at the two study sites? (2) How have the project proponents perceived the tenure and other challenges and how do they plan to address those challenges? (3) What have the proponents done to engage communities in the process of establishing REDD+? (4) Are communities informed about and satisfied with the process of establishing REDD+? The paper shows that while the proponents have worked to resolve tenure issues and engage communities, there is still frustration among project participants because of a lack of progress toward implementing compensation and benefit sharing system. The paper concludes that it is crucial to safeguard the rights, access and participation of local communities, and benefits to them, throughout the design and implementation of REDD+ projects.

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1. Introduction

In recent years tropical forests have received increased political attention for climate change mitigation due to their role in capturing and storing carbon (Bal et al., 2007; Bonan, 2008; Turner et al., 2009). Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) refers to local, national and global actions that reduce emissions from forests and which enhance forest carbon stocks in developing countries. The plus sign indicates the enhancement of forest carbon

stock as well as forest regeneration and rehabilitation, decreased emissions, increased carbon uptake and carbon removal (Angelsen, 2009). Before the '+' was added, REDD (previously known as Avoided Deforestation) was from an early stage considered to be one of the least expensive ways of reducing global greenhouse gas emissions (Stern, 2006). For many tropical countries, this approach may lead to long-term protection of forest ecosystem goods and services, but there are also high expectations of positive social and livelihood outcomes from REDD+ projects (Karsenty, 2011). The anticipated social impacts include improvements in living

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standards as well as benefits from other environmental services. However, these social objectives could be threatened if certain conditions are not fulfilled in the design or implementation of REDD+ projects. This includes land tenure reform, which is perceived as a precondition for payment and community member participation in REDD+ projects (Karsenty, 2011), benefit-sharing arrangements, equity and decentralization in forest resource management, leading to more responsibility for rural dwellers.

An analysis of African state laws for compatibility with international treaties and declarations (such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Convention on Biological Diversity, ILO Convention 169, and Universal Declaration of Human Rights) reveals an absence of recognition of customary institutions and customary rights to land, resources, and forests in sub-Saharan Africa. Local communities are often marginalized in policy making processes, lacking official recognition of property rights to land. The problem is similar in other parts of the world. Agrawal et al. (2008) report that 75–85% of the world's tropical forests are still under formal government ownership, though rights to trees are sometimes considered separately from state claims to land. The problem remains important on a global scale. Specific concerns for Africa include governance issues and a weak civil society. However, progress has been reported in some countries like Tanzania where local communities and indigenous people have rarely enjoyed official control over land and forest resources (Lawlor et al., 2010).

Commentators have recognized that tenure is problematic in the forestry landscape and needs to be addressed before local REDD+ schemes are implemented. Indigenous peoples and local communities, supported by international organizations like the Forest Peoples Programme in the UK and the United Nations REDD programme (UNREDD), perceive tenure reform as a key governance challenge. Challenging conditions resulting from state ownership of forests may lead to forest tenure insecurity that disregards customary claims, creating uncertainties in terms of the fulfillment of REDD+ project objectives (Larson et al., 2010a,b,c). Significantly, respondents in governments have expressed optimism about the potential role REDD+ has to play in tenure reform. The issue of forest access and tenure has been raised by international groups such as the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the World Resource Institute (WRI), working with forest-dependent communities (Cotula and Mayers, 2009; Eliasch, 2008; Stern, 2006). Concerns have been raised that efforts to establish strong local tenure will be diverted by programmes that channel substantial resources into technocratic and short term approaches to REDD+ (Cotula and Mayers, 2009). Other observers stress that any tenure reform needs to be consistent with customary practices. In Congo Basin countries, this may mean recognizing different forms of communal ownership rather than individual private ownership (Jindal et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2011) bearing in mind that the ownership should include both the ability to manage (use) and to exclude (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992).

The rights of forest-dependent people are yet to be adequately recognized in forest resource and land

management. In Cameroon, the allocation of permits granted for non-timber forest products (NTFP) on a yearly basis by an inter-ministerial committee discriminates against rural dwellers lacking resources, favoring operators with easier access to permits and official quotas for marketing forest products, often pushing the poor into illegality (Ndoye and Awono, 2009). Although there is no conclusive proof that more secure tenure rights lead to an increase in benefits from forest resources, commentators recognize the importance of resolving tenure ambiguity and assuring community participation in REDD+ (Westholm et al., 2011).

Communities need to be part of the solution if REDD+ project implementation is to be successful as there is a risk that REDD+ schemes result in government, companies, conservation NGOs or speculators carving up forest lands and pursuing forest protection approaches that marginalize forest people (Griffiths, 2007). For this reason, the UNREDD programme stresses the importance of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as an operational guideline for the engagement of indigenous people and other dependent communities in the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007, Art. 41). This view is in line with observations by Ostrom (2010), who made the point that policies should focus on how to ensure the participation of local users in developing forest management plans. An absence of local communities' participation in such a complex process may compromise the possibility of REDD+ offering livelihood opportunities to forest communities (Cotula and Mayers, 2009).

This article examines the issues of tenure rights and participation in the context of REDD+ in two REDD project sites in Cameroon: the Payment for Environmental Services (PES) project led by Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) and the Mount Cameroon REDD+ project managed by GFA Envest under the Programme for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources of the Southwest (PSMNR-SW) region. Both aim at reducing forest loss and increasing forest carbon stocks and eventually at financial compensation for the achievement of these aims. We analyze the tenure preconditions and participation, and how they can be addressed in fulfillment of the project goals. The paper poses four questions:

- (1) What are the tenure conditions at the two study sites?
- (2) How have the project proponents perceived the tenure and other challenges and how do they plan to address those challenges?
- (3) What have the proponents done to engage communities in the process of establishing REDD+?
- (4) Are communities informed about and satisfied with the process of establishing REDD+?

The paper comprises four sections. The following section presents a theoretical foundation for analyzing tenure and participation. The method section elaborates on the methods used in addressing the research questions. The questions posed are subsequently answered in the results section. The implications of the findings are examined in a wider context in the discussion section. A concluding section summarizes the paper and discusses policy implications.

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